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Refining and Letting Go: An Actor's Process

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Thesis

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to everyone who wants to
embrace their creative selves.

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Abstract

Refining and Letting Go: An Actor's Process

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This thesis consists of three major sections. The first is a report of my coursework while at the university from August 2010 to April 2013 and how it culminated in an actor process towards working. The second section chronicles my experiences outside of the classroom, with influential persons in the theatrical community, and how they both have added to my process as an actor. The third section is a paper on my process playing the character of Mrs. Dickson of Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel* in my final performance at the university, as well as final reflection on where I am in my process as an actor.

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INTRODUCTION: WHY GRADUATE SCHOOL? WHY ACTING?

My primary reason for attending graduate school was to attain training and confidence as an actor. I was acutely aware that I did not know all there was to know about theater or being an actor. When I arrived in Austin, I was a novice in my skills and yet I had an immense desire to become a professional. When I looked at all the performers whom I admired and who had attained longevity in their careers, performing well beyond their youth, I noticed that they all had one thing in common: intense conservatory training. With this knowledge in mind, I headed to graduate school in hopes of developing the same craft that allows successful actors to make their living as an artists for decades.

My time at the university has not been a fairytale. My journey has been fraught with immense highs and lows. I have often wondered whether I would make it to the end of the program or if that decision even lay in my hands. But, I have made it through to the program's conclusion and have a technique that will ultimately breed good work and longevity. It this technique, an ardent passion to create and an unwavering stubbornness to perform that will pull my through my career.

In the following pages, I will elaborate on my experiences during my last three years of training. In the first part, I discuss my coursework at the university. In part two, I elaborate on my training and performances outside of the program's curriculum. In the final part, I reflect on my process in developing and playing my final role at the

university, Mrs. Dickson from Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*. In doing so, it is my belief that I will give you an honest and clear understanding of my approach as an actor.

PART ONE: COURSEWORK IN ACTING

Acting

With a foundation in the concepts of Constantin Stanislavski, each semester, the acting courses revealed methodical approaches to working as an actor. In my first year, I was introduced to numerous improvisation exercises including "Jump Improvs" and Meisner's techniques, such as repetition. In my second year, I concentrated on Shakespeare, comedy, and self-generated text. The final year, I delved into the world of dramatic realism through our showcase course and on-camera acting course. It was in this final year that I prepared for the world of professional actor, especially after joining the Actor's Equity Membership Candidacy (EMC) program by performing in the musical *Ragtime* at the Zachary Scott Theater in Austin, Texas.

Stanislavski

At the core of the Stanislavski method, one pursues an objective. My training is fundamentally rooted in this methodology that I learned in my first year with Professor Lee Abraham. The core of my work begins by first analyzing a text in the quest to find my character's needs. After grounding myself in the imaginary circumstances of the text, I employ an array of tactics in pursuit of objectives in the hope of overcoming my obstacles. By making clear and specific choices about my point of view towards the other characters and the dramatic events that unfold in the world in the play, I strive to reveal my honest, emotional life in support of my character. This approach represents my core actor process.

Meisner

My experiences with Sanford Meisner's techniques, albeit limited, truly forced me to learn to observe others and, in response, tell the truth. My scene partner would verbalize the effect I had on him or her. Initially, this exercise unnerved me. I lacked the confidence to put into words what I saw. With the guidance of Professor Lucien Douglas however, I grew more comfortable and my actor vocabulary expanded every time I did this exercise. I learned that my fear of another actor limits me on stage. What actors do on stage is reveal behavior and the inner lives of characters. Being afraid to interact with another actor is not helpful to me. It is my job to be fearless, to say what I see, and to allow for changes in my behavior and my partner's behavior. Through observation, I know that I am achieving my objective.

Shakespeare

In Shakespeare, I was pushed beyond a novice's understanding of the Bard and began to learn a tremendous deal about what being a professional actor entails. I was also humbled a great deal, in part because I realized how little I knew about the vastness of dramatic literature. With the guidance of Professor Fran Dorn, I learned that Shakespeare's text demanded that I learn to become more specific in my work. In Shakespeare, each beat is written into the text. These beats must not be passed by or thrown away by actors. Building on what I learned from Meisner, I became more aware of what true moment-to-moment work feels like. An actor must understand the poetic richness of the language and the actor must have proper voice control to emotionally

support the loaded text. When scanning the verse, an actor who does not support her voice to the end of the line will not reveal the full meaning of the sentence clearly. At the end of the line, there is usually a change in thought. So, at the end of the line something new and different has to happen. This is working moment-to-moment. Driving to “the end of the line” can reveal important information. I learned not to move forward to the next poetic line if in the moment before I was not truly connected to the text or my scene partner(s). If I rush through one moment and on to the next, I have covered truth. Actors should strive to reveal universal human truth at every instant.

This idea of extending through to the end of a line can also assist me in monologue work, and not just Shakespearean text. This idea can be a tool to effect my scene partner. In real life, most people do not begin speaking with the thought they will talk forever. What forces us to keep talking is our need to get something from another person. When we have not fully received what we want from another person, we use various tactics until we are successful or defeated. Each new thought is new information that needs a response from another actor. I learned to be an active listener responding to all new information. I can help my scene partner tell the story through listening and responding honestly. I am helping drive the scene. Each new thought, the “light bulb,” is paramount. It guides the audience on a journey through the story of the play.

Showcase

In the showcase class I solidified my confidence as an actor. Although it was difficult settling on the two pieces that I would use in our New York and Los Angeles

showcases, in the end I was quite pleased with my selections. It was one of the few times while training at the university that a part was tailor-made for my type and played to my acting strengths. I was more comfortable. My biggest successes materialized when I deeply invested in my partner. By focusing in this way, I shifted my attention away from trying to please the audience or make myself more at ease and on to telling my truth to another character.

Voice

I have spent much of my acting life training for the stage. As such, the development of how I use my vocal instrument has been extensive. I began to understand what it meant to prepare my voice for work onstage. I need to be heard by my fellow actors and my audience. By year two, I cemented my vocal warm-up technique and gained a sense of legitimacy that would allow me to extend my abilities as an actor while performing.

Voice Studies & Practicum

I attended voice studio for two-and-a-half years with Professor Barney Hammond. In this work, I was able to develop my “voice barre.” Similar in concept to the barre exercises of a ballet dancer, this voice-barre workout gave me the tools to explore the full range of my voice. The voice is related to action and the vocal exercises help me uncover my character’s objectives. I implore the techniques of “walking the text,” pounding walls, beating floors, all in an attempt to discover the shifts in my character’s emotional life.

The various exercises of moving the voice through the body and the extensive work of applying the voice to the physical exercises empower me. Warming up my voice is an instrumental part of my process as an actor. Before each show, I arrive early to do a series of exercises to energize and prepare me to handle the support needed for a two-hour performance. My voice-barre work has also helped me forge relationships with directors and other actors. I have often led other productions through warm-ups because of my voice training, especially with both *River City* and *Sing, Muse*, shows I was a part of while I was attending the university. When the director and fellow actors witnessed how helpful the warm-ups were for me, they wanted to learn them as well. These techniques ground me in the rehearsal hall and before my performances.

Dialects & Accents

I also had two years of dialect work with Professor Pamela Christian, which was based in the study of the International Phonetic Alphabet, or IPA. IPA is a system of phonetic notation based primarily on the Latin alphabets. Ultimately, however, I utilized a blended approach using those exercises and symbols that made sense to me. In my process, I select a voice in the world of the play, transcribe the text, and pinpoint vocal differences from my own dialect, which often included different pitches, cadences, and treatment of vocals and consonants. Then I do extensive character work, which includes researching cultural cues linked to the locations of the dialect.

Movement

The most influential series of courses for me were the movement courses. I started my graduate training very self-conscious about my body. As an actor, I was unaware of what my body did or how I could use it to tell a story. The classes I took shook my apprehensions away, and I found a new level of openness and comfort in storytelling through physicality.

Authentic Movement & Moving from Self

My first year was the year I grew the most. Working with Lecturer Tom Truss, I learned to connect the body to storytelling. Each day I was instructed to do two things: speak my truth and be in the moment. We started with “authentic movement.” Guided through a series of exercises and prompts, I started speaking from self by embracing my natural physical behaviors and habits. In doing, I discovered the movements that made me uncomfortable. Acknowledging the different types of movement that exist, I started crafting a character’s physicality, which may be different from my own. I am always a part of the character because I play the role, but the character is more than me. Knowing how to emphasize the differences between the character and me makes me a more skilled actor.

Movement, Vocabulary, and Character Work from Movement

Thinking about movement as a starting point in the development of character, I studied a number of different techniques including Viewpoints, Suzuki, Laban and

Alexander technique. The Viewpoints is a technique of composition that provides a vocabulary for thinking about incorporating movement and gesture in space with acting and speaking. My range of possible movement exploded simply by breaking down the different types of movements into categories. Suzuki is a great way to teach actors about being present and ready, due to its intense physical component of varied movement and exercises. I will revisit these two techniques later.

Laban is a great way to transform physicality into aspects of character. This approach divides movement into four effort categories: space (direct or indirect), weight (strong or light), time (sustained or sudden) and flow (bound or free). Having this simple vocabulary from which to create the movement of a character is helpful. I always spend time playing in these different effort categories and subcategories to discover what I believe to be the true physical essence of my character.

Learning Alexander technique did a lot of work toward releasing my body and mind from tension. As an actor, I need to be free of things that inhibit my work, such as stress, unnecessary tension and poor alignment. Understanding how tension is created and how to rid my body of it has been immensely helpful. I suffered the least amount of injuries while I took these series of courses.

In my second year, movement work transitioned from focusing on understanding the self to crafting a proper physical warm-up that could energize and relax my body. The warm-ups kept my mind and body in a place of relaxed readiness so that I could do the work ahead of me. Actors must work ardently to not confuse a sense of openness and playfulness with laziness. I learned to be loose and yet alert.

Collaboration & Self-Generated Work

For a significant portion of my training, I have felt like a novice. It was through this lens that fellow artists interacted with me and, at times, to my detriment. Luckily, however, this perception allowed for me to remain humble and open to all experiences. I am of the opinion that being humble is an important and helpful trait for actors. It is through our humility and compassion that we are most open to observing the world and revealing it in our performances. My collaboration, creating new work, and self-generated work classes that I took with Professor Stephen Dietz, Lecturer Kirk Lynn, and Professor Stephen Gerald proved my humility to be an asset and created a passion for writing.

I was most struck by the vastness of what is considered good art. The constant onslaught of new pieces was welcomed. Coming into contact with different styles and production aesthetics all at once was tremendously rewarding. It allowed me to develop my personal aesthetic and learn how to critique other work. I gave myself the permission to have an opinion, to have a say as an artist. It was a milestone. I have found that is necessary to continue to re-engage with different forms because it develops my taste and make it more specific and nuanced.

Professor Dietz' class brought together actors, directors, designers, and playwrights. One of the first things that immediately piqued my interest in this class was making a mission statement for "your people." The actors got to work on drafting an "Acting Company Manifesto," penning what our contribution would be to the class.

ACTING COMPANY MANIFESTO

Promise To Bring

- **professionalism** (*which includes but is not limited to*):
 - respect for my colleagues' specific skill sets
 - preparedness
 - punctuality
- **artistry** (*which includes but is not limited to*):
 - openness and availability
 - willingness to try new things
 - focused and active listening
 - an imaginative spirit and a sense of play
 - individuality
 - presence (Second Circle)
 - openness to all possible outcomes
- **commitment** to script/text/the work/story

Expect to Receive

- **professionalism** (see above)
 - respect
 - colleagues who are prepared
- **artistry**
 - to be treated like a collaborator in addition to an actor (this is a debate)
 - the trust that I will get the job done
- **surprises**
- **challenges**
- **freedom to explore multiple choices in rehearsal space**

What We Do

- **live truthfully under imaginary circumstances**
- **bring a kinesthetic reality to the telling of stories**
- **human transmitter of story to the audience (this is a debate)**

This act of declaration highlighted for me the many roles that come together to stage a theatrical production. The manifesto reminds me that I had a right to create in that space. I am more than just a body. I learned that I am not responsible for holding together the entire production. If I commit to the contributions made by the actor then I am doing my best to further the creative process; that is all I need to do.

Similarly, in our creating new work and self-generated text, I learned that was responsible for creating work that spoke to me. Speaking from my experiences, I was given opportunity to write pieces for myself. I can be more than just an actor. I can be my own playwright as well. In writing for myself, I ensure my future as a working artist.

PART TWO: OUTSIDE THE CLASSROOM

Programs

SITI Company

My summer with the SITI Company saved my actor spirit. Up until that summer, I had many doubts about my belonging in a professional training program. I felt as though I lacked skill. I had difficulty connecting with the varying actor theories that were being taught and with the artist community in the department. Instead of being fun, acting felt increasingly forced and uncomfortable. I was not mastering my craft. SITI ended that discomfort. Situated in upstate New York on the campus of Skidmore College, I was surrounded by artists from all over the world. It was in this space that I finally felt welcomed and I connected with the language being used to create theater.

Our days were filled with practicing their version of intense Suzuki training, Viewpoints, and collaboration courses. I would stretch myself physically doing Suzuki exercises and applying them to voice-work, readiness, and professionalism. I was always very present because I was pushed to my physical limitations. As a result, I was more honest with my responses. Viewpoints stretched my actor soul and allowed me to feel creative in my choices as an actor. Similar to Laban, it had a vocabulary that made sense. Moving through ideas surrounding space (arc, spatial relationships, topography), shape and gesture, and time (tempo, duration, kinesthetic response, repetition), I could create stories physically. The theories and language surrounding acting made sense to me. It made creating my own process more tangible.

I felt validated. My work was embraced. This group of artists welcomed my point of view, acceptance I had not yet fully experienced at the university. I had a voice in the room that was respected and taken into consideration. I mattered. Leaving the university setting gave me much needed perspective about the possibility of my contributions in the world of theater. Over the course of the summer I blossomed and was a witness to many forms of bold, evocative storytelling. It gave birth to the beginnings of my artistic voice.

Performances

River City

I came back to UT from my experience with the SITI Company at Skidmore College and was rattled to my core. After spending the summer growing as an artist, I was slammed into a limiting structure. Luckily, Rudy Ramirez and Lydia Nelson cast me in the UTNT production of *River City*. The directors informed me that although I did not match the type for the role they had cast me in, they thought, from my audition, that I would make surprising actor choices that revealed exciting colors about the character. Being validated, despite not fitting type, was great. It was the first performance at UT where I was truly given the space to apply craft as an actor. I was given the room to work as opposed to being stifled.

I gained more from this experience than I thought I would. First, I would be dealing with the issue of my blackness on stage. I had not yet had the chance to do that during my training. Given the experiences in casting I will likely have in the future, I enjoyed getting the opportunity to engage with the material. Secondly, I was able to work

with extremely talented community actors. The rehearsal hall was open, in part because community actors are performing primarily to perform. There is no pretense involved. The love of storytelling was paramount in the room. Lastly, I was given the role of vocal coach for the production. The work I had done in my voice studios allowed me to stand out as a leader and contribute in more ways than one.

Sing, Muse

Rudy Ramirez cast me once more in another new work entitled *Sing, Muse*. The piece had been workshopped for over a year and I joined the cast in December 2011. We continued to workshop it through the spring and rehearse over the summer. I enjoyed working on a new work as a collaborator and actor because I was largely responsible for my character's story. I could truly work from self because I wrote it.

Ragtime

I was cast in the ensemble of *Ragtime*, directed by Dave Steakley at the Zachary Scott Theatre in Austin, Texas. I was very eager, albeit nervous, to be a part of the production. I would get to work at a big theater in town and get into the Equity Membership Candidacy (EMC) program, a near necessity for actors looking to perform on stage, get paid better wages, and qualify for other great benefits. The experience was quite memorable. In addition to performing in my first musical since my undergraduate days, I learned a lot about the endurance an actor needs to rehearse and perform in a show of this magnitude. The physical, mental, and creative fortitude required to make the work

is high. I was able to develop my endurance as an actor as I continually worked to find fresh ways to make the story alive as we progressed through the extensive rehearsal and run of the show.

Visiting Speakers, Lecturers, and Performers

There have been a number of successful industry speakers, lecturers and performers who have left an indelible mark on me during my time in the graduate acting program.

Meryl Streep

Meeting an actor of her caliber was humbling. The fact that she too always thinks her current job may be her last job was comforting. It was oddly refreshing to know that the fear of unemployment as an actor never leaves you. We are a company of many. Her candor and graciousness also reminded me how kind actors have to be to one another and to other artists to keep working. It is not just about my work, it is also about who I am as a person.

Kevin Kling

At the invitation of playwright and Professor Steven Dietz, the renowned storyteller Kevin Kling has probably left one of the biggest marks on me thus far. He inspired me because he gave such a great performance that was in no way affected by his physical limitations, a birth defect that shriveled his left arm and later, a motorcycle

accident that paralyzed his other. He has been able to achieve so much. It's sometimes very easy for me to become overly self-conscious in response to the industry's importance on looks. He reminded me of the basics. It is about creating a world for the audience that they can get lost in. Revealing human truth simply always retains its power.

PART THREE: BEING MRS. DICKSON

With my role already assigned to me, I began the work of transforming myself into Mrs. Dickson in Lynn Nottage's *Intimate Apparel*, the culminating project of my third year of training. The fascinating contradiction is that acting is not about becoming another person; the character is always me. When melding the two realities, the trick is to magnify and enhance individual characteristics that are most like the character. My process toward transforming involved a combination of techniques I have used during the last three years in graduate school and in experiences outside of the university.

Pre-Rehearsal Preparation

I began with the text. For me, it is important that the first read occur in one sitting. My initial response to the play is often my most honest. This sense of the play tends to stay with me as I develop the character I am playing and my understanding of the story. I then put the script aside and allow myself to ruminate on images, thoughts, or questions that come to mind about the story.

The next day, I read the script multiple times. Only by reading it multiple times would I begin to crack the surface of who Mrs. Dickson was and what she wanted. I came to see her as a strong, independent woman who, although never having children of her own, found a way to nurture young women, like Esther, the protagonist of the play.

One thing emerged as a chief concern. The Mrs. Dickson character is written as more than twice my age. In this regard, I understood that this show fulfilled more of an educational necessity than a professional one—it is highly unlikely that I will ever play a

character that is more than twice my actual age. The role, however, would give me the chance to expand my skills in playing a range of ages.

I recognized immediately, that although I don't have the experience of being a woman in her fifties or being the caregiver of a child, I am the eldest of six children from a fairly conservative, immigrant home and have been a teacher, mentor, and tutor for much of my life. At my core, I am a nurturer. Mrs. Dickson is also a nurturer. I know what it's like to care for the future of a younger person and to have the desire to shepherd an individual through life's difficult phrases. Using those experiences as the eldest and as a mentor, I cared for Esther. I was helping Esther get through life's difficult dilemmas. My wisdom came from a resolute faith in my desire to help Esther have the best life she possibly could.

From my reading of the script, I was also acutely aware that I would have to contend with voice Nottage created for my character. Although my character was an educated woman she spoke in this vernacular.

“Never. You were a godsend when you come to me at seventeen. Yes. I remember thinking how sweet and young you was with a sack full of overripe fruit smelling like a Carolina orchard” (Nottage, 8).

I was immediately struck by passages that had Mrs. Dickson speaking, switching from standard American syntax to a more relaxed style. She was a woman of means, but there is no mention of her educational pedigree. She pulled herself up by her bootstraps, which made sense as an explanation for her speech style. I embraced her “code-switching” because it revealed unique aspects about her status and cultural background.

In addition to understanding the language of the play, I also worked hard to understand the world of the play. We benefited from having several dramaturgs on hand to offer detailed research regarding the historical context of the play. As ensemble, we shared information electronically at <http://utintimateapparel.wikispaces.com/>. Entitled “Intimate Apparel Actor Packet,” the resources given to us were plentiful and useful.

However, I know that dramaturgs will not always be available to help me contextualize the play’s reality. So, I did additional research to complement the resources that had been given to me, making sure to answer questions that were character-specific. Important areas I looked into were turn-of-the-century African-Americans from New York, the housing of women, careers for women at this time, courting and marriage practices, apparel of the time, and opium/drug addiction because they were all things that Mrs. Dickson had to deal with on an everyday basis or at some time during her life. Many of the themes were answered by the research. In addition, I was able to benefit from the website www.pinterest.com and created an e-board I entitled “Additional Historical Research – Intimate Apparel.” Conveniently enough, I was able to connect with other cast members on the site, exchanging images and information similar to the way we added and shared information given to us by the dramaturgs. One book in particular that was helpful was the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture’s The Black New Yorkers because it chronicled life during the time of Mrs. Dickson.

In the Rehearsal Hall

The first rehearsal is always a unnerving in the best possible ways. The room buzzes with excitement and energy. The play is going to be birthed for the first time with a new group of creators who will give life to words, lifting them from the page into a three-dimension reality. What I appreciated from this experience was the director's insistence that we read the words simply without trying to act. She encouraged us to allow rather than push. The desire to prove one's worth as an actor was replaced by the desire to listen. And so the energy in the rehearsal hall was established.

We did not spend much time doing extensive table-reading at the director's behest. We were on our feet by the third day of rehearsal and the playing commenced. Luckily, I'd spent some time learning my lines and getting off-book before the rehearsal process began. Typically, I record sections of the script, including all other character's lines, and repeatedly play the recording, saying my lines along to the recording. I also ran the lines during or exercise or Suzuki work because it forces my attention to be focused on breathing and the lines become planted and second nature. During the rehearsal process, if I find myself forgetting lines, I also write them repeatedly in my rehearsal journal, or ask people to quiz me and stop me the moment I get something wrong, no matter how minute. I am not truly free to play unless I have the lines dedicated to memory. I cannot work with a book in my hand and fully listen and respond to my scene partner. It's just a matter of practicality; the script is still a distraction. Interestingly enough, during the process of *Intimate Apparel*, the director was adamant that we hold our scripts in rehearsal while working until we were *truly* off-book. It was a place of slight contention.

It's very disconcerting to have to break a moment in order to grab lines. I wanted to get to the playing aspect of performing instead of being pushed to hold the text. I, however, appreciated the director's insistence that we not rush the process. There are many discoveries that can be unearthed when you don't rush and allow yourself to be where you are in terms of memorization, even if that means you have to break focus to look at the text. The actor is still discovering the character's intentions, objectives and obstacles.

Halfway through the rehearsal process, I started to wear the costume of the character. My character's costume was very modest, albeit ornate. While in rehearsal I replicated the feeling of the costume. For Mrs. Dickson that included wearing character shoes, a corset, a scarf, long-sleeved tops, and a rehearsal skirt without pants underneath. I could very readily feel when I ignored the truth of my character, when I wasn't fully garbed in her attire. For instance, when I noticed my scene partner's eyes were drawn to my décolletage a red flag immediately went up. Mrs. Dickson wouldn't draw attention to those parts of her body in that way. Attention instead needed to go to the craftsmanship of her attire rather than her body. By not covering up, I was covering truth. Having to get comfortable living and breathing in that reality is important to achieve early in the rehearsal process. I never wanted it to be ostentatiously obvious that I am a 20-something millennial on stage; I want to look as comfortable as possible in my costume. I have to tell that truth first. Although I was uncomfortable at first with the attire, over time this feeling dissipated and I was able to own Mrs. Dickson based on the collaboration between the playwright's words, the costumer's design, and the director's image. And as I had known the most about Mrs. Dickson, because I studied her the most and the closest,

I made sure to add details they may have missed, such as a wedding band to represent her status as a widow.

The same can be said for integrating props into the scene. After going through the script, I immediately notified our stage manager to get me the props I needed. At times, I was disgruntled when things weren't provided for me. However, it is ultimately my responsibility to get the things I need in order to tell my character's story. If the stage manager was unable to attain the props I felt I needed as Mrs. Dickson, I got them. When we transitioned into the Oscar G. Brockett Theatre, where our production would go up, I was able to figure out what additional props I would need. For example, under the harsh stage lighting and heavy costuming, I would sweat profusely. So instead of wiping my face, a more contemporary gesture, I requested a handkerchief from the costume department. I was also lucky because the costume was tailored to my body and I could ask them to create things that would help me do my job as an actor on stage. I asked them to create pockets in the dress design that could hold both the handkerchief and other props I might use during the play.

Moving into the space requires a very distinct intellectual transition. For one, the voice work has to be intensified to account for the larger space, audience bodies, furniture, and other things that absorb sound. I learned that I needed to do a different vocal warm-up than my standard. As such, I started arriving earlier to rehearsals so that I could do an extended vocal warm-up. I wanted a grounded, supported voice that would last me the run of the show. Also, from the stage design, I knew that Mrs. Dickson was the only character that didn't have a private space. In my attempt to create a sense of ownership of

space, I made sure that my voice demanded attention. As part of my vocal warm-up, I worked to enhance the richness of my deeper vocal tones, often found in older women's voices.

Throughout the process, taking notes is very important for me as an actor. Once a director gives me a note, I need to hold on to what the director has said. The easiest way to do that is to write it down, so that I can analyze it and commit it to memory after rehearsal. If my goal, ultimately, is to work often, I must make sure notes stick. I learned that the best way to make sure I don't forget specific notes is to write them down, work on it, and commit it to memory.

The Performance

The Chekhovian nature of Nottage's writing is quite intricate and requires an understanding of human relationships that only emerges the more times you run the play. Given the time period, turn-of-the-century 1905, the comparison makes sense. Similar to Chekhov's characters, Nottage's characters in *Intimate Apparel* do not always reveal what they really want or need. It is with great cost that they reveal their deepest desires. My director's insisted that the ensemble avoid the trappings of playing our character's surface objectives but rather utilize subtext and play what exists between the lines of the text.

During the course of our run, I continued to find nuances and a relaxed sense of readiness that felt more honest. I was able to truly understand that she was someone, who when she allowed herself, loved hard and could be hurt tremendously by Esther. Even

though Esther was in early middle age, she was only starting to enter her adult understanding of intimacy and Mrs. Dickson wanted to shield her from pain. Having that sense of ownership is what I always strive to attain. The only thing that saddened me was that I would have loved to spend many more weeks getting a deeper understanding of Mrs. Dickson.

IN CONCLUSION: A LESSON. AN UNDERSTANDING

Playing Mrs. Dickson in my last role at the university, I have learned a great deal about myself as a person and as an actor. My approach towards becoming a character is more nuanced and streamlined. I feel as though I know step-by-step what I must do from the moment I am cast in a role to the final bow. Simply put, I have realized that as an actor, it is a combination of whatever works to help me uncover the character's truth.

The question then becomes, how do I know I have done good work as an actor? What does it feel like? What does it look like? The answer to this question is threefold. First, as an actor I have to do all my homework. I need to thoroughly research the world of the play and my character's place in it. I have to be off-book and ready to play in the rehearsal hall from the first rehearsal. I have to do all the work that allows me to feel comfortable enough to explore different tactics while on stage, based on my character's objectives, obstacles, and given circumstances and be ready to fight for them with the director if need be. Secondly, I have to be physically and mentally healthy as an actor before I can experience the vulnerabilities of the character I am playing. If I am unhealthy as an actor, I lack the ability to successfully stretch beyond myself to reveal my character's truths. Thirdly, the easiest way for me to know if I am being effective as an actor in the pursuit of my objectives is if I am effecting change in my scene partners. With the help of a great director and designers, the world of the play can be realized. By contributing as an actor in this way, being responsible for my part, I know I am doing good work.

I feel honored to have gotten to work on such a rich complex text that is American, but more importantly, about the Black American experience. Throughout my time at the university, I've learned to acknowledge what my blackness means on stage. My race is political. In fact, I desired more chances to explore accepting this idea and rejecting it as an artist. To have a chance to really sink my teeth into a role that I will have the chance to play again when I have aged was a treat. To leave graduate school having the opportunity to work on an established, acclaimed, award-winning piece of writing is without a doubt one of the best things I've done.

As I proceed in the future, I am looking forward to exploring the canon of dramatic work. I am most, excited, however, to develop as a playwright and a producer. I think it's important for young artists to be able to create work for themselves, developing their voice as artists, and telling stories that reflect their world. It is my hope that I am able to produce my writing and engage with dramatic performance on stage, camera and online.

Beyond anything, due to the direction of our noble director, Melissa Maxwell, I can enter a rehearsal hall confidently as a professional actor, knowledgeable of what I must do as an artist and a contributor. It means preparing myself to be ready to go from the moment rehearsal starts to the moment it ends. It means doing work in between rehearsals to clear up beats, sharpen reactions, work on dialect, and clarify intentions. I must always work to find deeper meaning so that each time I run a scene, I am unraveling more truth. It also means having high standards, respect for my craft, embracing the

play and actor ensemble work. I will always be ready and present in my work. The more specific I am about my character's reality, the better my performance will be.

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